

Susan McElrath

The Archives at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House NHP

Located at the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site in Washington, DC, a unit of the National Park Service and National Capital Parks-East, the National Archives for Black Women's History (NABWH) is the fulfillment of Mary McLeod Bethune's vision of a legacy for succeeding generations. Its mission is to identify, collect, develop, interpret, and preserve the legacy of Mary McLeod Bethune including her unique focus on the individual and collective history of African-American women.

The NABWH collects materials about or illustrating the life and work of Mary McLeod Bethune, the National Council of Negro Women, and other African-American women's organizations. While focusing on the years of Mary McLeod Bethune's life, 1875-1955, the NABWH seeks to document the continuing impact of her vision to the present time.

Promoting access and encouraging use of the collection are key goals for the staff of the NABWH. This emphasis means that researchers are able to turn to a variety of tools to gain information about the archives. The Bethune Council House's newly expanded web site <www.nps.gov/mamc> features an index and a description of the archives holdings. In addition, information in computer-searchable formats appears in the National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections (NUCMC), the National Inventory of Documentary Sources (NIDS), and ArchivesUSA. These tools will provide potential users with remote access to all levels of available bibliographic data such as finding aids, collection descriptions, and information on the institution. Archives staff has also developed several internal databases to assist staff and users to locate photographs and other useful data.

Like other archives, NABWH provides reference service in person, by mail, by fax, by phone, and via email. Last year, the archivist developed two document packets for use in the classroom. Teachers are currently field testing the packets. The

outreach program at the NABWH includes a newsletter, staff presentations to a wide variety of groups, and an annual open house. The archivist has given talks on cataloging archives to beginning library school students at the Catholic University of America. The outreach program not only encourages use of the collections but also occasionally leads to the acquisition of a new collection.

As with all archives, preservation and protection of the collection are a high priority. Recently, the National Park Service installed a new compact shelving system that provides additional security along with needed additional storage space. In addition to the traditional measures of removing staples and paper clips, flattening folded and rolled documents, and storing documents in archival folders and containers, staff store material separately by media when possible and isolate items with mold or other problems. **Staff is currently looking into working with a commercial microfilmer to film the archives largest collection, the Records of the National Council of Negro Women.** The

microfilm will ease the wear and tear on some of the more fragile parts of the collection and permit use by researchers unable to travel to Washington, DC.

As part of the Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site, the NABWH follows the management procedures of the National Park Service. The Bethune Council House is in the process of developing a General Management Plan. This plan will guide the National Park Service's decisionmaking process for the site over the next 15 to 20 years.

One of the crucial elements of the General Management Plan is the Scope of Collection Statement that provides the National Park Service with the parameters for collecting materials for the archives. PL 102-211 which incorporates the Bethune Council House into the National Park System also established a Federal Advisory Commission to advise on matters relating to the General Management Plan. The archivist serves as liaison to the Commission's committee on the NABWH. The commissioners have proved to be vocal supporters of the NABWH and its programs.

Susan McElrath is Archivist, Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site.

Anyone interested in the archives or the General Management Plan is encouraged to contact the staff at the Bethune Council House for additional information at 202-673-2402.

Mary McLeod Bethune. Photo courtesy Mary McLeod Bethune Council House National Historic Site.

